

American History Through the Prism of Wilderness

Wilderness has long held nutritional, economic, nationalistic, religious, psychological, and aesthetic import for Americans of both native and immigrant stock. Hence understandings of the historical significance of “wilderness,” and the intractably related term “nature,” must first take into account the dual influences of Indian and European legacies. Wilderness, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the foremost lexicon of European heritage, can comprise a “wild or uncultivated region or tract of land, uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals,” something “figured as a region of a wild or desolate character, or in which one wanders or loses one's way,” or a “piece of ground in a large garden or park, planted with trees, and laid out in an ornamental or fantastic style, often in the form of a maze or labyrinth”—definitions at considerable variance with the Native American experience.¹

Across the North American continent—in the ritual hunting of mammals large and small, in spiritual practices ranging from vision quests to powwows, in the gathering of nuts and berries from mid-Atlantic woodlands made passable by wildfires, in the taking of fish by weirs suspended over thundering northwest rapids, in the migrations of Plains tribes following undulating herds of bison, and in the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash in the South—the lifestyles of pre-Columbian tribes were anchored by amicable relationships with the natural realm. Basic elements pervaded every nook and cranny of Indian wigwams and longhouses, so that distinctions between wilderness and civilization carried little meaning prior to the arrival of Europeans. Although most scholars wisely decline to imbue them with modern environmental consciousness, “Native people understood full well that certain actions would have certain results; for ex-

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “wilderness.”

ample, if they set fire to grasslands at certain times, they would produce excellent habitat for buffaloes one season or one year later.”² In subsequent centuries, Indian populations were devastated by rampant disease, land seizures, proselytization, acculturation, and reliance on manufactured goods such as textiles, alcohol, and metal tools traded for the pelts and foodstuffs demanded by European colonists. Nevertheless, Native tribes have maintained reverential ties to Mother Earth— *ake*, *ekana*, *maka*, and *mankato*, to the Shawnee, Creek, Lakota, and Sioux, respectively—who has provided them food and shelter as well as metaphysical sustenance since prehistoric times.

By contrast, the Pilgrims and Puritans who colonized the eastern seaboard in the early 1600s first associated the taming of the vast, savage terrain that extended to the western horizon with trepidation, conquest, and eventually, freedom. Initially seaside stockades separated bands of god-fearing colonists from what Plymouth Colony leader William Bradford described as “a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men.”³ Only when the Virginia Company began granting Jamestown settlers “land to work for themselves”—“headrights” of 50 acres for Protestant white Englishmen who could afford their ocean passage—did the settlement begin to flourish.⁴ Soon thereafter the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies grew into “self-governing farm towns that parceled free land to families according to traditional norms of need and status,” so that the preordained expropriation of lands from the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the East, to whom private property was a foreign concept, writes historian Carolyn Merchant, “became the basis of Anglo-American society.”⁵

² Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999), 212-213, quoted in Carolyn B. Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 21.

³ William Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1901), 94-95, quoted in Carolyn B. Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 26.

⁴ Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 121.

⁵ Ibid.

In the post-revolutionary period, beginning with the Land Ordinance of 1785 and spurred on by Thomas Jefferson's enduring belief in the mythic yeoman farmer—"the backbone of the ideal American republic, lived on in the hopes and dreams of millions of immigrants, freedmen and women, and everyone else who envisioned the farm as a bastion of American life"—the federal government set in motion a century of territorial apportionment with dire consequences for the fate of the American wilderness.⁶ On the western-rolling frontier, surveyors divided public lands into 36-square-mile townships consisting of rectangular, 640-acre plots that paid little heed to the topography of local environments. Debates over minimum purchases at auction initially left wealthy bidders and plantation owners in control of huge tracts of woodlands that fast became tobacco and cotton fields. In time, however, the Harrison Land Act and pressure from legions of poor, squatting farmers began to democratize frontier settlement.⁷

By the Civil War's end, with the passage of the Log Cabin Law favoring squatters, the Homestead Act of 1862, and the completion of the land-hungry transcontinental railroad in 1869, most Americans were finally afforded the Jeffersonian opportunity to carve out a farm from virgin wilderness. However, agrarian dreams beyond the western frontier's 100th meridian quickly met with the harsh reality of drought-prone climates. "Moreover," says Merchant, "the cattle-ranching, dry-land wheat production, and mining that could be practiced in the arid West required far more land to support a family than the 160-acre norm of federal land policy."⁸ Still, despite the hardships encountered by pioneers lured into deserts by boosterism—and a growing nationalistic appreciation by educated elites for America's grand mountaintops, misty waterfalls, and sprawling prairies depicted by Hudson River School painter Thomas Moran, narrated by

⁶ Hal K. Rothman, *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 12.

⁷ Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 122-123.

⁸ Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 124.

James Fennimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, and ornamented by John James Audubon's *Birds of America*—Manifest Destiny's transformation of nature forged onward.⁹ The General Mining Act, the Timber Culture Act, the Desert Lands Act, the Free Timber Act, and the Timber and Stone Act of the 1870s all bespoke of an incessant desire by bureaucrats and industrialists to cultivate and harvest timber, irrigate deserts and grasslands, and exploit mineral reserves to feed the nation's burgeoning cities and factories at the expense of Native lands.

Not until the late nineteenth century did the tide of American wilderness consumption begin to ebb, in part with a warning from Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who posited the Frontier Thesis in an 1893 essay. Historian Hal Rothman:

Turner believed that the United States had been special because of its open land, a 'safety valve,' which could accommodate excess population. This frontier had been the crucible of democracy, Turner insisted, the catalytic factor in creating democratic institutions. It was the seed of what was best about the American nation. Without it, Turner mused, the nation ever after would be different, muted, transformed.¹⁰

Jackson crystallized the formative importance of wilderness to America's national character, and simultaneously pointed to the demise of such greatness with the evaporation of untrammelled territory. The argument won the respect of Theodore Roosevelt, destined to assume the presidency in 1901, an industrious man whose passion for the out-of-doors—for setting aside forests and wildlife preserves while simultaneously hunting birds and big game—would come to define the competing sentiments of the Progressive era.¹¹ By the 1890s, a growing chorus of affluent critics worried about the excesses of industrialization: "the buffalo, or American bison, had been reduced to a relict population, unable to survive without human intervention, and the passenger

⁹ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 18.

¹⁰ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 14.

¹¹ Ibid.

pigeons that once filled the skies were poised for extinction.”¹² In addition, unchecked logging, overgrazing of prairies, hillside erosion from mining, and air and water pollution from factories threatened to mar the very natural wonders of which the young nation had grown proud.¹³

One window for understanding just what was at stake, the historical significance of American wilderness in the pre-morning dawn of a new century, when the roots of modern environmentalism were barely visible: some of the first conservation laws enacted by Congress, as a result of discordant public pressure. In a formal sense, what aspects of nature did the government seek to protect, and for what reasons?

An obscure Amendment 24 to the General Appropriations Act of 1891, which granted the White House new authority to delineate “forest reserves”—later rechristened “national forests”—for the chief purpose of preventing catastrophic floods due to excessive logging, provides an important example. Rothman views Amendment 24 as “a harbinger not only of the idea of conservation but also of the centralizing power in the presidency,” although such power was limited solely to the declaration, not the administration, of protected lands. Note too the underlying impetus for the new authority: not high-minded, aesthetic concern for the long-term welfare of woodlands, which by the nineteenth century had for the most part been leveled throughout the Northeast and parts of the Great Lakes region, but fear for the welfare of townspeople living downstream from erosive clear-cuts.¹⁴ Similar pragmatism was applied in earlier moves to protect the freakish geology of Wyoming’s Yellowstone Park in 1872, and to ensure a stable watershed for New York canals and rivers with the Adirondack forest preserve of 1885.

A second category of conservation legislation stemmed from government and museum-funded excavations of ancient civilizations that once inhabited Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon, and

¹² Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 17.

¹³ Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 127.

¹⁴ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 17-18.

other Southwest ruins. Newfound pride in the continent's cultural heritage resulted in popular support for temporary withdrawal—a provisional federal mechanism for halting development in wilderness areas deemed prehistorical—although like forest reserves, withdrawn lands carried a simple designation and required an act of Congress to garner substantive, permanent protection.¹⁵ Thirdly, as “the destruction of animal species by organized and wanton hunting became common,” the future President Roosevelt and other founding members of the Boone and Crockett Club became appalled by the use of new technology in buffalo and waterfowl kills, and campaigned for gaming limits on moralistic grounds.¹⁶ In permitting “the secretary of agriculture to take measures to preserve, distribute, reintroduce, and restore game birds and wild birds,” the Lacey Act of 1900 initiated federal wildlife policy, despite objections from immigrants and rural Americans who depended on wild ducks and geese as a food staple.¹⁷ Rothman, Merchant, and other historians agree, however, that until Roosevelt assumed office and began engaging some of the nation's top thinkers on a broader vision for valuing nature, the aforementioned strands of wilderness appreciation failed to coalesce around a common goal.

At the core of the Progressive movement's approach to wilderness was a struggle between two ideologies that would permeate environmental debates for the remainder of the twentieth century: preservationism, embodied by Sierra Club founder John Muir, a wily Scottish Presbyterian whose paeans to California's peaks echoed the transcendentalists in that “waterfalls, valleys, and even deserts took on characteristics of the sublime, associated in the public mind with the awesome power of God”¹⁸; and conservationism, embodied by New York's Gifford Pinchot, the nation's first formally trained forester, who studied in France and went on to lead

¹⁵ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 27-28.

¹⁶ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 29.

¹⁷ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 31.

¹⁸ Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 132.

the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry in 1898 and the U.S. Forest Service in 1905, believing in "forestry as a crop, managed to guarantee a fixed annual supply of trees ready for cutting."¹⁹ Meanwhile, after migrating to Yosemite Valley and sleeping outdoors for months at a time, Muir came to see in wilderness "the terrestrial manifestation of God"—as opposed to a visiting Ralph Waldo Emerson, who attempted to moderate Muir's views, likening wilderness to "a sublime mistress, but an intolerable wife." Pinchot favored balancing wilderness values with logging, hunting, and fishing, and soon split with Muir over whether to allow grazing on public lands. Although Roosevelt befriended and respected the views of both men, the president sided with Pinchot; their Progressive conservation, it seems, "truly had at heart the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run—as long as that greatest number comprised the people who counted at the turn of the century, the American middle class."²⁰

Muir's greatest battle for hearts and minds, however, followed the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, when the city's mayor set about finding a secure water source, much as the New York legislature had done with the Adirondacks in the 1880s. This effort, however, had quite the opposite effect of protecting wilderness: nearby Hetch Hetchy Valley, sister to Yosemite, seemed an ideal dam site, resulting in a landmark public controversy that lasted five years, unprecedented in the short history of conservation. Muir presciently viewed the project in national terms, predicting future dams and casting proponents as Satanists. A line between wilderness and civilization must be drawn, said the preservationist, and that line was narrow Hetch Hetchy canyon. Pinchot argued that the benefits of water and electricity outweighed the aesthetic value of the area's marshland. Although Roosevelt was said to have been emotionally aligned with Muir, he again sided with Pinchot in granting San Francisco a dam permit.

¹⁹ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 43.

²⁰ Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, 47.

Paralleling this struggle among national strongmen to define the proper role of the American wilderness was an alternative conception of all things natural: the influence of women on gardening and landscape architecture. Since the 1840s, women had reemerged as plant caretakers as an indirect result of the Industrial Revolution, during which prevailing gender attitudes excluded genteel women from labor-intensive agriculture, even as women on the frontier toiled in fields alongside men. Upper class housekeepers were expected, however, to keep their lawns and gardens looking respectable, which became an increasing challenge as those spaces grew smaller in cities. Andrew Jackson Down's *The Horticulturist* and *Gardening for Ladies* promoted feminine gardening and offered suggestions for making the process more pure and lady-like: wearing gloves and using miniaturized spades, for instance. Poet Celia Thaxter's elaborate landscape on the windswept Isles of Shoals off New Hampshire typified estate gardens of the 1870s, and conformed to a popular vision of cultivated wilderness inhabited by trees and shrubs bordering water that influenced Frederick Law Olmstead's design for New York's Central Park. By the early 1900s schools of architecture and horticulture had become available to women in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, although traditionalists clung to notions of domesticity in which "the suburban bride settled into her new home and went to town bent on investigating gardening tools," according to one publication. The advent of gardening clubs during the war years ensured that neatly-trimmed lawns and heavy perimeter vegetation—the maintenance of a private, backyard paradise—became an indelible part of the nation's relationship with nature.

In the shadow of the Hetch Hetchy Dam, as women honed the art of landscape architecture, hydrological architects became increasingly adept at harnessing water and power from the West's teeming rivers, heralding yet another front in the war to protect wilderness that would ultimately spawn twentieth century environmentalism. In his *Report on the Land of the Arid Re-*

gions of the U.S. in 1878, government surveyor John Wesley Powell “identified the amount of annual average rainfall as constituting a fundamental difference between the lands of the western and eastern United States,” laying a blueprint for the later formation of the U.S. Interior Department’s Bureau of Reclamation, a dam-fixated New Deal agency at odds with what David Brower and other environmentalists saw as the conservation mission of national parks and monuments.²¹ Similar struggles to determine best use surrounded forester Aldo Leopold, whose advocacy for the definition and protection of wilderness areas eventually altered the culture of the U.S. Forest Service and laid the basis for ecology, the scientific investigation of interdependent systems of living organisms. In recent decades, through the convolutions of climax and chaos theories, conceptions of nature have evolved to the point that researchers describe ecosystems in terms of patch dynamics—mosaics of small-scale environments sharing similar characteristics and responding to ceaseless agitations and disturbances—a far cry from the view of wilderness harbored by trembling bands of colonists clinging to the shores of a savage continent mere centuries ago.

²¹ Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 129.